

Biblical Christianity Is Bankrupt

Rev. Michael Dowd - August 18, 2010

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said—grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed"? Instead they say, "No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way." — Carl Sagan

Biblical Christianity is bankrupt. I use 'bankrupt' in the exact sense of the term. A business that goes bankrupt still has value and is still capable of producing useful goods or services. It still has an inventory and trained professionals in its employ. Until the day insolvency is declared, it also usually has a façade—a bright and upbeat demeanor by which its clients and the community at large assume it to be relatively healthy. The only thing wrong is that a bankrupt business is no longer able to accomplish its purpose: to be successful. It is precisely in this sense that I suggest Bible-centered faith is bankrupt.

Yes, Christianity still has tens of thousands of churches reflecting an enormous range of theological diversity—and, yes, some are still thriving. Christianity has rituals and practices that many still find meaningful, along with organizations and ministries doing good and important work in the world. The Church is not bankrupt because it has run out of things to say or do. Rather, it is bankrupt because the otherworldly product it has sold for centuries now lacks wide appeal. Christianity now lags behind our most advanced secular methods and tools for providing salvation in *this* life. As well, by failing to update its "map of reality" to correspond with our best evidential understanding of how things are and which things matter *today* (as discerned through empirical science, historical research, and cross-cultural experience), Bible-centered faith can no longer provide the two essential services all religions must provide in order to survive.

The root 'religare' means to *link together*. Evolutionarily robust religions over the tens of thousands of years of human existence have been those that, as philosopher of religion Loyal Rue [observes](#), nurture "personal wholeness" at the individual level and "social coherence" at the community level. To do so, they must operate with as accurate a map as possible of what's real (how things are) and what's important (which things matter).

Biblical Christianity that does not integrate our best evidential understanding of the universe and human nature is doomed precisely because it is wedded to unchanging scripture. It suffers from what I call "[idolatry of the written word](#)." No longer does it *link together* what young people learn in church and what they learn in their science and history classes at school—and on the Discovery and History channels at home. As well, biblical Christianity's strongest lifeline for claiming continued relevance is seriously frayed—although only those who track scientific advances in neurobiology, infant psychology, and the social instincts of apes and monkeys may be aware of this perilous condition.

What is that frayed lifeline? It is the intertwined strands of two crucial religious functions: first, the matter of where we acquire our moral compass, and second, how we come into [right relationship with reality](#), or "get right with God," when we have fallen from the path. As to the former, we moderns come to the Bible with a culturally evolved moral compass by which we carefully pick and choose which passages to preach and study and teach our children. We do not get our morality *from* the Bible.

The reason we do not consult the book of Exodus when dealing with a disrespectful teenage son, or the book of Leviticus for parenting advice when a daughter loses her virginity, or the book of Numbers for how to handle Sabbath breakers, or the books of Deuteronomy or Revelation when needing guidance regarding family members who choose a different faith, is because murder is no longer considered a moral option.

As popular science blogger PZ Myers has [claimed](#), “There is no surer way to make an atheist than to get them to actually read scripture.” This is especially true of the Internet generations in America—those whose parents and church leaders can no longer shield them from other-than-biblical views and understandings of the world.

The result: [Young people are leaving church by the millions](#) and [Christianity in America is in steady decline](#). Absent some radical shift in how we raise our children in Christian environments, we can expect America in the 21st century to follow the faith-falling trajectory pioneered by Europe, Canada, and Australia in the 20th century. To cite just two examples: Evangelical icon Josh McDowell, who has worked for Campus Crusade for Christ since 1964, reports that 94% of high school graduates leave the faith within two years. The Southern Baptists estimate that 88% of their kids leave the church after high school. (See [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

My Exchange with Albert Mohler

[Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr.](#), president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and I are engaged in a public debate sparked by [my recent sermons, podcasts, and blogposts](#) expressing gratitude for the [New Atheists](#). Here’s the progression:

July 17: Press Release: [Michael Dowd to Christian Church: New Atheists are God’s Prophets](#)

July 19: OneNewsNow.com: [‘Evolutionary evangelist’ gives heresy a bad name](#)

July 29: My blogpost: [Giving Heresy a Bad Name!](#)

Aug 8: My sermon text: [Thank God for the New Atheists!](#)

Aug 10: Mohler’s blogpost: [Thank God for the New Atheists?](#)

In reading Dr. Mohler’s latest, I was impressed by his integrity and demonstrably Christian spirit. He generously quoted me throughout and fairly represented my position. What more could I ask from a debate partner? Hence my zeal for continuing the conversation with this reply on why I view biblical Christianity as bankrupt.

In what follows I will address the main point Dr. Mohler makes in his critique of my enthusiasm for the New Atheists:

“Give Michael Dowd credit for reminding us where the rejection of biblical Christianity inevitably leads.”

I will also respond to his assertions that I reject (a) the supernatural, (b) a personal God, (c) the authority of scripture, and (d) a biblical view of sin and salvation. In the process I will outline the contours of an “[evolutionary Christianity](#)” and “[Christian naturalism](#),” and further clarify what I mean by “biblical Christianity is bankrupt.”

My Testimonial

In Matthew 7:15-20 Jesus is reported to have said that the way to recognize whether or not someone is a prophet is *not* their beliefs, but their fruit—their character and actions. If this is true, Dr. Mohler and others might wish to think twice about using me as an example of the inevitable result of embracing an evolutionary worldview.

As anyone who has known me over the years will attest, today as a science-honoring, evolution-celebrating [Christian naturalist](#) I experience and exhibit far more of what the Apostle Paul called “the fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control, than I ever did when I was a God-fearing, Bible-believing un-naturalist.

Trust, gratitude, and inspiration have become my ever-present companions precisely because of my wholehearted embrace of an evidential, deep-time view of [human nature](#), [death](#), and [the trajectory of big history](#). More, an evolutionary appreciation of [human instincts](#) and [supernormal stimuli](#) has freed me from struggling with my sinful nature. Living in deepest integrity (i.e., “abiding in Christ”) has become virtually effortless, thanks to an evolutionary view of God, guidance, and good news.

During my youth and teenage years, I believed that humanity’s most dependable source of divine guidance and inspiration (our best map of how things are and which things matter) was Roman Catholic tradition and hierarchy. Guilt and fear were present in abundance. After my born-again experience in an Assemblies of God church in Berlin, Germany, at the age of 20, I embraced the Protestant sense of “solo scriptura” (scripture alone) and began seeing the Bible as providing our best map of what’s real and what’s important. Arrogance and self-righteousness joined my emotional parade—though my anxiety shifted from self concern to concern for family and friends whom I was convinced were destined for eternal torture because they did not believe as I did.

In light of a meaningful science-based view of reality, I now see both of these approaches to religious faith as antiquated and, in a modern world, pernicious.

Supernatural is Unnatural is Uninspiring

Dr. Mohler notes that I reject the supernatural, but it is more accurate to say that I reject the notion that supernatural is anything more than pre-natural. For me, and for many others, understanding has replaced belief. I don’t *reject* the claim that Harry Potter can fly on a broom; I *understand* that story as fiction. I don’t reject the seemingly supernatural things I do in my dreams; I understand the nature of the dream state and appreciate how it differs from daytime reality.

Everything shifts when we move from [a worldview given by tradition and authority to one based on facts and empirical evidence](#). For example, *evidence* suggests that the only place that the so-called supernatural realm has ever existed has been in the minds and hearts (and speech) of human beings—and only quite recently.

As Benson Salem [demonstrated](#) in a 1977 issue of the American Anthropological Association journal *Ethos*, the notion of *supernatural*—in opposition to *natural*—is a Western invention. The ‘supernatural realm’ only came into being as a thought form after we began to understand things in a natural, scientific way. Only when the concept of ‘the natural’ emerged was it deemed necessary by some to speak of ‘the supernatural’: that

which was imagined to be above or outside of nature. Previously, people everywhere used a blend of descriptive and metaphorical (dreamlike) language when speaking about matters of importance. As I wrote in [the preface](#) of my book, *Thank God for Evolution*:

How was the world made? Why do earthquakes, tornados, and other bad things happen? Why must we die? And why do different peoples answer these questions in different ways? The big questions that children have always asked and will continue to ask cannot be answered by the powers of human perception alone. Ancient cultures gave so-called supernatural answers to these questions, but those answers were not truly supernatural—they were pre-natural. Prior to advances in technology and scientific ways of testing truth claims, factual answers were simply unavailable. It was not just difficult to understand infection before microscopes brought bacteria into focus; it was impossible. Without an evolutionary worldview, it is similarly impossible to understand ourselves, our world, and what is required for humanity to survive. For religious leaders today to rely on pre-natural answers puts them at odds not only with science but with one another—dangerously so. Their resistance, however, does make sense. Until scientific discoveries are fleshed into the life-giving forms of beauty and goodness (as well as truth and utility), scriptural literalism will command power and influence.

As we have collectively learned ever more about the natural, the supernatural has become ever less. After all, supernatural and *unnatural* are synonyms. Anything supposedly supernatural is, by definition, unnatural. And most people find unnatural relatively uninspiring when they really stop and think about it. It should not surprise us that young people en masse are turning their backs on religion and that atheists are riding bestseller lists when “the gospel,” God’s great news for humanity, is imagined as this...

An unnatural king who occasionally engages in unnatural acts sends his unnatural son to Earth in an unnatural way. He’s born an unnatural birth, lives an unnatural life, performs unnatural deeds, and is killed and unnaturally rises from the dead in order to redeem humanity from an unnatural curse brought about by an unnaturally talking snake. After 40 days of unnatural appearances he unnaturally zooms off to heaven to return to his unnatural father, sit on an unnatural throne, and unnaturally judge the living and the dead. If you profess to believe in all this unnatural activity, you and your fellow believers get to spend an unnaturally long time in an unnaturally boring paradise while everyone else suffers an unnatural, torturous hell forever. [*Excerpt from [my sermon](#), “Thank God for the New Atheists!”*]

Personalizing a Natural God

Dr. Mohler, in reading my [book](#) and [blog](#), claims that I reject the notion of a personal God. Given his traditional sense of a personal God, I do not fault him for that conclusion. Here, however, I wish to offer an alternate (and, I assert, a fuller and more compelling) sense of what a personal God could entail in our modern, evolutionary world.

St. Thomas Aquinas, one of Christianity's most celebrated theologians, warned 750 years ago, "A mistake about Creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God." What this means is that the more we learn about the nature of the universe, if we're not also updating what we mean when we use the word "God", we may have understandings of

the divine that are so out of touch with reality as to no longer be life-giving—perhaps even requiring a book like [The God Delusion](#) to be written to remind us of this fact.

Specifically, we've been thinking of God in unnatural and therefore trivial ways for far too long. In a few thousand year old universe, where heaven was just a few hundred miles skyward, the God portrayed in much of the Bible made sense. None of us, not even the most fundamentalist here in America, lives in that kind of universe anymore. The Hubble Space Telescope makes the distance scales and configurations used in the Bible metaphorical at best. Rather, we now can celebrate a God that is no less real, ancient, majestic, and powerful than the cosmos itself, and no more inclined than the cosmos to take sides in matters of war, weather, or geological upheaval. Given the vastness and age and mysteries of the universe as we now know it, to insist that the Creator is divorced from, and less *real* than, Creation is to not only dishonor God but to relegate the divine to the ever-contracting realm of that which is not yet known.

Darwin didn't kill God. To the contrary, he and Alfred Russel Wallace offered the first glimpse of the *real* Creator behind and beyond the world's myriad mythic portrayals of the divine.

As Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and other 20th century scholars of mythology and world religions remind us, *we simply cannot understand religion and religious differences if we ignore the human propensity to relationalize—that is, personify—anything important or mysterious*. Evidence from a wide range of disciplines, from cognitive neuroscience to anthropology to cross-cultural study of the world's myths and religions, all support the claim that [God is a personification not a person](#), and that we instinctually forget this. More, there is no counter-evidence! This fact alone makes sense of the thousands of competing stories around the world as to what God supposedly said or did. "God" is a mythic name for Reality in all its sublime fullness. Any so-called God that is imagined as less than this is unworthy of our devotion and deserves to be mocked, as the New Atheists so readily do.

Poseidon was not the god of the oceans, as if some supernatural entity separate from water were looking down from on high or rising from the deep. Poseidon was the personification of the incomprehensibly powerful and capricious seas.

Sol was not the spirit of the sun, as if there were a separation between the two. Sol was a sacred name for that seemingly eternal, life-giving source of heat and light—and occasionally life-taking source in times of desperate drought. By saying "Sol," "Helios," or some other proper name, our ancestors experienced that reality as a "Thou" to be related to.

Today most of us have a starkly different subjective experience. We look up and say "the sun" and think of "it" in a depersonalized way: not as the God "Helios" but as the generator of the element helium through [stellar nucleosynthesis](#). Such an intellectual gain need not, however, come at an emotional loss. Again, my relationship with the Sun, as with all of reality, is personal.

Whenever any story or any scriptural passage claims, "God said this" or "God did that," what follows is always, necessarily, an interpretation. It's an interpretation of what some person or group of people thought or felt or sensed or wished Reality was saying or doing, and almost always as justification after the fact or to make a theological point.

There is no compelling evidence that such subjectively meaningful claims are ever objective, measurable truth. In other words, had CNN or ABC News been there to record the moment of "divine revelation," there most likely would have been nothing out of the ordinary (nothing miraculous) to report on the evening news—nothing other than what was coming out of someone's mouth, or pen, or whatever folks wrote with back then. If we fail to grasp this not only will we trivialize the divine, but also, even more tragically, we will miss what Reality, or God, is up to today.

My own transformation from biblical Christianity to [evolutionary Christianity](#)—and from religious un-naturalist to [religious naturalist](#)—demonstrates the profound difference between *believing* in a personal God and *relating to* Reality personally, that is, communing with Life As It Really Is. For example, prayer from my now-evolutionary perspective is a far more intimate process, and does not require me to believe in anything otherworldly. Prayer is no longer an act of petitioning a far-off, invisible, unnatural entity to miraculously intervene in the world according to my wishes or desires. With an understanding of God as no less than a personification of Reality, through prayer I experience myself as a cell in deep communion with the larger body of which I am part.

In the words of Philip K. Dick, "Reality is that which when you stop believing in it doesn't go away." Anyone can develop a habit of mindfully and heartfully communing with this Ultimacy, of quieting our minds, jettisoning judgments, surrendering to Life As It Really Is, seeking deep and intuitive guidance, opening to the way of the heart, engaging in contemplative prayer, and many other names and activities that put us in a state of radical openness and receptivity to wider and deeper wisdom. In so doing, our experience of life will improve enormously—even if the outward conditions of our existence change not a whit.

Believing in a personal God—giving mental assent to the existence of a supernatural being with a personality—may or may not make a difference in the life of the believer. When belief does not richly transform one's experience, however, such belief becomes a booby prize.

Rethinking "the Authority of Scripture"

I don't reject the authority of scripture, as Dr. Mohler suggests. Rather, I reject a trivial understanding of what counts as scripture.

I reject the notion that our best map of reality and most helpful signposts for living are to be found in ancient, mythic tales that were passed on orally for generations before being written down. I reject the idea that God's most vital and dependable guidance would have come in the distant past rather than the present.

Ours is a time of space telescopes, electron microscopes, supercomputers, and the worldwide web. It is also a time of smart bombs, collapsing economies, and exploding oil platforms. This is not a time for parsing the lessons given to a few goatherds, tentmakers, and camel drivers.

Imagine a teenage girl with serious emotional and social problems. Then you learn that her father hadn't spoken to her since she was a toddler. Well! You'd blame the father for how screwed up the girl is, right? Of course, we all would. What kind of God would offer his best and most important guidance back when people believed the world was flat and word processing meant recording insights on animal skins?

The primary cause of the Church's decline in size and influence in Europe, Canada, Australia, and now in America is its failure to grasp that science reveals God's nature, God's ways, and God's guidance far more accurately than the biblical writers could have understood or transmitted.

The elephant in the sanctuary is this: Nothing is driving young people away from God and Christianity more quickly and surely than the Bible interpreted literally. (This is why some of the [New Atheists are promoting Bible study](#) so vigorously.)

The main way Reality is communicating to humanity today is through evidence. To use religious language: *God is still speaking, and facts are God's native tongue—not Hebrew or Greek or King James English.* The Church will continue its slide into irrelevance or extinction so long as it equates "scripture" with old legends rather than accumulated evidence. Historical, scientific, and cross-cultural evidence is the main way God is addressing humanity today. To celebrate evidence *is* to honor "the authority of scripture."

Thinking of divine revelation in magical ways will probably last a few more decades in America, and longer in the developing world. But recognizing that God/Reality communicates through scientific discoveries will change everything. I predict that Christianity in the West will have a born-again experience by mid-century, thanks to a richer and more expansive understanding of what qualifies as scripture.

A Biblical vs. Evolutionary View of Sin and Salvation

Finally, Dr. Mohler interprets that I reject a biblical view of sin and salvation. But this is not accurate. I accept the biblical view as the best understanding of the human condition available at the time. Indeed, I *celebrate* the biblical sense—as [myth!](#)

Fortunately, we can now also appreciate human nature from a natural, factual standpoint. And in my experience, it is precisely an *evolutionary* view of our inherited proclivities, our unchosen nature, that young people find inspiring—indeed, salvific.

Ancient, unchanged scriptural stories and doctrinal declarations are inadequate guidance for meeting modern challenges. To restrict the real-world relevance of our religious traditions to what could be known and communicated millennia ago makes no more sense than to consult a first-century text on dental care when you need a root canal.

There were, after all, no such things as distilled alcohol, cocaine, addictive painkillers, television, or Internet porn back when Moses was leading his people or when Jesus was urging that compassion trump scriptural law. If sin was tempting back then, it is even more tempting now. We live in an era of "supernormal stimuli." As Dr. Deirdre Barrett explains in [her 2010 book](#) of that title,

The most dangerous aspect of modernity arises from our ability to refine things. This is the link to drug, alcohol, and tobacco addictions. Coca doesn't give South American Indians health problems when they brew or chew it. No one's ruined his life eating poppy seeds. When grapes and grains were fermented lightly and occasionally, they presented a health pleasure, not a hazard. Salt, fat, sugar, and starch are not harmful in their natural contexts. It's our modern ability to concentrate things like cocaine, heroin, alcohol—and food components—that turns them into a menace that our bodies are hard-wired to crave.

Consider, too, that the consequences of routine interpersonal conflict were not inflated in

biblical times by hair-trigger weapons stored in a pocket, under a car seat, or in a bedside table. These weapons can maim or kill, moreover, with no preliminary hand-to-hand combat.

The slide into sin dangerous to self and others is far more potent today than when Martin Luther was famously struggling with his own sinful nature nearly five centuries ago. Fortunately, scientific discoveries now help us understand the magnitude of this evolutionary “mismatch” of inherited instincts with conditions that can now so easily ruin our lives. An evidential view of human nature can also help replace guilt and resentment with forgiveness and gratitude.

Imagining that our (and our loved ones’) temptations and struggles owe to our great, great, great...grandmother eating an apple isn’t particularly helpful or believable today. Moreover, such thinking perpetuates dysfunctional patterns—no matter how much we may pray for relief. But when guilt and condemnation are banished by gratitude and trust (thanks to an understanding of our evolved nature and [growing in integrity](#)), heaven is ours. Inherited proclivities then have little or no power over us and we can experience true freedom. Cleaning up the past becomes a joy rather than a penance. Shame and embarrassment vanish with the dawning of self-knowledge and the realization: “Of course, of course, of course!”

From a platform of self-acceptance—and also of gratitude that we owe our existence to ancestors who survived and reproduced thanks to the very same instincts we now find challenging—we can begin the constructive task of improving our ways of being, interacting, and living. An evolutionary understanding thus provides perspective and practices for achieving lasting victory over that which formerly caused us to stumble. Halleluiah!

Counselors and psychologists, too, are using these new understandings to develop ever more effective tools for taming deep-seated inclinations that would lead us astray. Together, this evolutionary understanding of *why* leading an exemplary life can be so difficult in today’s world and *how* we can best go about helping self and others stay the course are experienced by many individuals, especially the young, as saving good news. It is saving good news about the world that really matters: *this* world, not an imagined otherworld, which for young people is a lifetime away—if they take it seriously at all.

A traditional view of heaven is far from appealing to most Westerners under forty. I have never met a Christian of any age who can look me in the eye and honestly say that an eternity with no challenges or difficulties yet with conscious awareness of the everlasting torment of others, including some they knew and loved, would be heavenly. We all know that would be hell.

When God’s greatest promise is imagined as cosmic fire insurance with a balcony seat to witness the eternal torture of others, we should not be shocked to learn that young people deem such a “reward” repulsive—and judge that form of religion as bankrupt.

Conclusion

In summary, Dr. Mohler’s warning that I represent “where the rejection of biblical Christianity inevitably leads” may well backfire. When given the choice between an unnatural otherworldly paradise available only in the afterlife and an actual heavenly existence—the peace that passes all understanding—here in the real world, my hunch is that most young people will opt for the latter.

To be clear: I don't reject biblical Christianity any more than Jesus rejected Judaism. Indeed, I've devoted my life and ministry to helping Christianity evolve. As long as I'm graced to live, I will remain an unabashed heretic proclaiming the gospel according to science!

[Michael Dowd](#) is the author of [Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World](#) (2009: Plume), which has been endorsed by [six Nobel Prize-winning scientists](#), [noted skeptics](#), and by [religious leaders across the spectrum](#). He and his wife [Connie Barlow](#), an acclaimed science writer, have lived entirely on the road since April 2002. They have addressed more than a thousand [religious and secular audiences](#) across North America.

Personal website: <http://MichaelDowd.org>

Educational website: <http://TheGreatStory.org>

Book website: <http://ThankGodforEvolution.com>

Podcasts: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/podcast.html>

RELATED:

[Thank God for the New Atheists!](#)

[Thank God for the New Atheists?](#) – Albert Mohler

[Evolution as Meaningful, Inspiring Fact](#)

[Atheists Promote Bible Reading?!](#)

[The Salvation of Religion: From Beliefs to Knowledge](#)

[Idolatry of the Written Word](#)

[God Is a Divine Personification, Not a Person](#)

[Getting REAL About God, Guidance, and Good News](#)

[Religion Is About Right Relationship to Reality, Not the Supernatural](#)

[Evolutionary Spirituality: Coming Home to Reality](#)

[Good and Bad Reasons for Believing](#) – Richard Dawkins

[Bible Stories Your Parents Never Taught You](#) – Michael Earl

[America's Religious Decline and Secular Boom](#) – James A. Haught

[Evidence: The Decline of Christianity in America](#) - Davidson Loehr

[The Bible in Human Transformation](#) - Walter Wink (bankruptcy metaphor)

["What Reality in Human Experience Do We Point to with the Word, 'God'?"](#)